

JUDEO-ISRAELI DANCES

(This article appeared in the 1949 Annual of the College of Jewish Studies)

Dancing, in ancient times, among all people, played an important part in their daily lives, whether for social needs or religiously solemn purposes. The same is true of the ancient Hebrews. The Penateuch, considered the oldest written document of the Hebrew old testament books, speaks of dancing too. Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, danced. In later periods the dancing is mentioned more often. We know that dancing was a part of the religious ritual in the Bein ha Mikdash — the Holy Temple of Jerusalem.

We do not know the type of dancing the Jews did in those days. The prohibition laid down in the Ten Commandments against graven images deprived posterity of paintings which would give us some idea of the form of posture of the old Jewish dance. With the destruction of the Temple and exile to Babylonia, as the Jews hung up their lyres upon the willows and wept, we read no more of dancing. But we can state with certainty that dancing did not cease as a means of joyous expression on such occasions as weddings, "Milah's" (Circumcision), "Pidyon haben" (Redemption of the first born), "Bar Mitzvah" (Confirmation), etc. However, the Jewish dance was not universal anymore. In each country the Jews danced differently, influenced by the environment of the native populations in the lands of their dispersion.

Today, the Jewish dance can be classified in five main categories: 1) The Jewish dances of the European (except Hassidic) and American Jews; 2) the Hassidic dance of semi-religious ecstasy of the Jews of Poland; 3) the Yemenite, Ladino and other Oriental Jewish; 4) the Palestinian dance of pre-Israel Period; and 5) the Israeli period.

In some countries where the Jewish population was heavily concentrated, as was the case in Poland where the Hassidim lived, the dance acquired a character which is considered Jewish. To less extent this was true of the Jews of Russia and the Balkans. In the Orient, only the Yemenite Jews developed a form of dance which, though Oriental in every phase, is, nevertheless, to be construed Jewish. It is a type of dance, however, which is much too strange and difficult for the Western Jew to master and feel at home.

The most common type of dance among the East-European Jews was the "Frailach". Frailach means, happily or joyous. During any happy event the participants said to the fiddlers: "Shpielt mir klaysmorimlach eses frailach." (Play for me musicians, something joyous), and the musicians, played as the guests danced. The Frailach type of dance was simple; for the most part it was a fast walk. The entire wedding party could participate as it required to follow the leader who led them through various floor patterns. These patterns are not original with the Jews, since they are a primitive type of dance that are likewise done by many other nations, ancient and modern (the Farandole-Farandula type of the French and Basques, simplified grand marches, Balkan serpentine dances and the Polonaise of the Polish gentry and Russian royal courts). The Jews created dozens of Frailach tunes, all bearing strong Roumanian-Moldavian influence.

In Russia (pre-world War I), besides the many Russian ballroom dances which they adopted (Pas d'Españ, Alexandrovska, the Polish Krakowiak), the Jews also



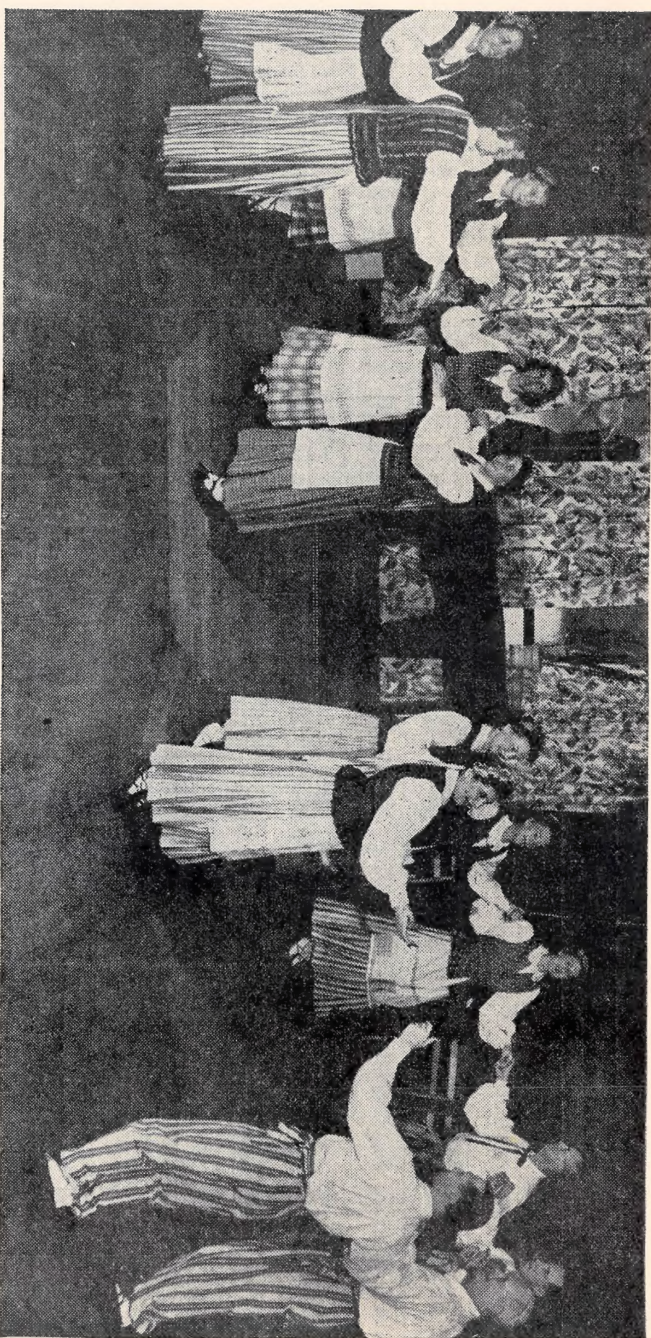
The type of costume a Hassid would wear. Dark colors for the man. Due to a biblical injunction they do not cut facial growth and the ear-locks (Payot) is one of their marks of distinction. Undneath the coat they also wear a four cornered cloth, called "Tstisith" whose four corners have a cluster of threads knotted and wound in a certain prescribed manner. These "Tstisith" which every male must wear, is considered sacred, and the threads are held during prayer. The above picture is of Vyt's Beliajus and Miss Ethel Jacobson.

created the Sher (diminutively — Sherele "Little Scissors"), based on the square dance then in vogue practically throughout Europe. The Sher portrays perfectly its kinship with the square dances (Quadrilles) the world over.

It seems that the Jews did most of their dancing during weddings, for that was considered the happiest event in one's life. As a result many wedding dances were created. Dances for the "Mikhatanim" (in-laws), dances before giving away the bride, dances of the presentation of the "Khalah" (a fancily braided white loaf of bread), "Khosen Kalah Mazal Tov" (Extension of good luck to the newly weds), dances of the matrons when the bride is initiated and accepted as a member of the circle of married women, and the comic "Beroigetz Tantz" a dance portraying a married couple "falling out" but the husband calms the wife's anger with presents of jewelry.

The Hassidic dance, was as a rule, performed by men only. It should be classified as a "creative dance". The Hassid created as he went along. In character it was aesthetic and with strong religious feeling. For the dances usually followed after a plentiful Sabbath feast and after singing at great length many "Zmitroth" — songs of praise to the glorious Sabbath, the dancing commenced. The whole body, hands, eyes and facial expressions were employed. Naturally, women were kept out of such dances. But on other, less religious occasions, if women did dance with the man they did so through the medium of handkerchieves, corners of which were held by the man and women, but never (save us from sin) holding a woman's bare hand.

At the turn of the 20th century a migration to Palestine of many young Jews, known as the "Khal-



The above picture shows Ethel Turner O'Bryne's synthetic Lithuanians (not a single Lith in the whole group) doing the last figure of the Women's Mlkita. They are one of the first non-Lithuanian groups to present Lithuanian dances with costumes and a flavor unmistakably Lithuanian. Ethel O'Bryne is the first one in the ladies' half, right hand circle, foreground. Mr. Paul O'Bryne, one of the artists for California's Let's Dance magazine, is the second gent to the right. They are a San Francisco, Cal. group.

SYD GIVES CAL. SQUARE

DANCERS ORAL SPARKING

Sydney J. Harris, trouble — shooting and fault — finding columnist of the Chicago Daily News, the city's respected daily, devoted his December 20th column "raising Cain" with Californian Square Dancers — "after spending a few weeks in California this summer." Says Syd:

"One frenzied experience with the square dance (I still get shortness of breath when I think of it) made the Charleston, the Bunny Hug and the Black Bottom seem as tame and decorous as a Saturday afternoon tating party at Aunt Mathilda's.resembling a cross between a bacchanalia and a Notre Dame scrimmage. Each dance last 20 minutes, or until the callers voice grows hoarse. You are constantly tripping and twirling, grinning foolishly into strange faces, bumping buttocks with wild indifference, and dripping more saliva than the entire Pony Express after a hard day's run."

"There is no respite from this terpsichorean torture,not even opportunity to tuck in your shittails as they keep creeping up toward the 50-yards line Then, for diversion, they do a little thing called a toe-end-heel dance, where all the men and women line up facing one another, tap their toes, then their heels, curtsy and bow, spin around, shake hands, and reel over to the next partner. After this gets going in full stride, the room becomes just a floating nightmare of doughy faces, fetid breaths, limp hands, rubbery legs and glazed eyes."

For a fleeting hour I thought that Sidney J. Harris must be exaggerating. But that very same morning I received in my mail the "American Squares" magazine. In it, under the titled article "The Southern California

Picture", the author Chris Stuart, in a tone one would never know whether he was bragging or complaining, writes:

"Square Dancing in Southern California has been taken up by every strata of the population and, goaded by a desire to outdo their contemporaries, the pace of the dancing has increased to the unbelievable speed from 140 to 150 MBM. (Metronome Beats per minute). At some of the parties the dancers swirl about in what appears to be almost a frenzy, the only sound being the "swish" of the long skirts of the women and the gliding feet on the floor."

Then it is true. It says so in the official square dancers organ. It is a very unhealthy sign and it might indicate as the beginning of the end.

FOLK ART EXHIBIT IN PRISCO

On November 19-20, an exhibition of folk arts, such as costumes, pictures, jewelry and dolls, were exhibited by Miss Ruth Prager at Madelyrne Greene's dance studio in San Francisco. Miss Prager returned recently from Germany where she has worked for the past four years with Displaced Persons groups.

THE COUNTRY DANCERS

The Country Dancers will meet every other Wednesday during the winter quarter in the dance room of Ida Noyes Hall at 7:30. Dances done will be entirely English country dances, and all dances will be taught. February, 1 and 15. March 1 and 15.

For members with some experience, the Country Dancers will meet on alternate Wednesdays, same time and place as above. In these meetings, we will try to do some of the more difficult dances, and also to work on individual points of style as much as possible. Dates of the meetings are as follows:

February 8 and 22, March 8.

GREATER ST. LOUIS FED. ELECTIONS

The following officers were elected for 1950 by the Greater St. Louis Folk Dance Federation. President: Kenneth Lissant. Vice-President: J. R. Scott. Recording Secretary: Mrs. W. Wirtzel. Corresponding Secretary: Miss Marie Wickey. Treasurer: Art Hernan.